

Gifts from the Chippewa

Lately I have been somewhat challenged by my work, which right now involves day upon day of sitting at a table with my colleagues, developing management options for the forests of the Chippewa. One of the challenges to this task is the location of the table. It is in a basement, and for me, it really doesn't matter what color a basement room is painted, nor how brightly it may be lit. Putting me in any room that does not have windows to the outside world really does me in. Sunlight nourishes me.

The bigger challenge to this task is that it seems like any time you sit more than one person at a table, you are going to have more than one opinion. Sit a roomful of people down, and guess how many opinions are going to exist. I don't know about you, but I think that listening, really, truly listening, to those other opinions is not a skill that most of us are born with. Rather, it is perhaps something you learn, if you really work at it.

As you might imagine, some days have gone better than have others, and from time to time, frustration builds and patience lapses. Be that as it may, we need to keep at it. That is why I brought my heart to that basement room, and hung it on a nail. I felt I needed a reminder of just why it is we do these things, and why it is I continue, despite not always having a good time at it.

Most people do not know that one of the fundamental parts of my essence is that I am a gatherer.



All summer long, and even into the fall and winter, I spend some time collecting various plants and plant parts to hang and dry in my garage. When the weather turns cold, I'll sit down and make wreaths out of these plants. Never for sale, these wreaths are intended as gifts. This year I built one wreath. This particular wreath is formed into the shape of a heart. It is intended as a gift for a friend of mine who lost her home to the July 2, 2012 windstorm. When her home has been rebuilt, I will bring her this gift. I like to think of it as a gift from the Chippewa.

I love gathering. For me, roads are a key part of this activity. Not just any kind of road; slow roads are what is needed... the kind of road on which it doesn't matter if you poke along, and then pull off to the side when you spot a particular plant you might have need for. This is not the sort of driving that you should do, say, on your way about the Cities. Such driving there would likely earn you a ticket, if not cause an

accident. But if you are selective, the forest roads in our area can be just the right kind of road for such things.

What I like about gathering is that it causes you to slow down, look around, and really notice life. You notice which kinds of grasses have turned to a color that you appreciate. You look for the species of goldenrod that best hold their color, and when it is you need to collect them in order for the flowers to fully open, but not shatter. You learn where it is you can snip a few swamp milkweed without having to get your feet soaked, in order to bring some purple to your stuff. You watch for jack pine deadfalls, for they have some of the best lichens, the green of which will stand the test of time. Sages will give the wreath a pleasant odor. Alder cones and any manner of seedpods bring another whole dimension to your work.

There are any numbers of folks who gather things from the Chippewa National Forest. Some are gathering firewood; others take game. Bough picking brings income to some. Birch bark harvest leads to some beautiful crafts. Then there are those who are gathering plants for medicinal or religious purposes. For me, gathering is a sure-fire way of cultivating inner peace. It puts me in touch with the natural world, and demands a pace all its own. It encourages me to reflect, and brings on a sense of gratitude. It is impossible for me to be crabby while I gather. I hope it is like that for others, too.

A few months ago, I heard someone talk who had recently been to the Canadian School of Peacekeeping. He had many intriguing things to relate, not the least of which was a practice they'd had of passing a feather around the circle, with the holder of the feather being allowed to speak until they felt heard. More than once, I have wondered what that would be like. I have wondered so much about that experience, and the others this person told about, that I have thought if I could scare up enough money to buy myself admission to this school for a week, I would really like to go there. I would like to go and see what such a place might teach me, and in what better ways I might approach my life, and especially my job, as a result. It's kind of a funny thing. When your job involves the management of our natural resources, you really aren't that successful at it unless you have developed the ability to listen well to others. The gifts from the Chippewa are many, and part of the secret to helping the land to provide them is to understand what matters to other people.

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